The New Criterion

Features March 1988

The anguishes of E.M. Cioran

by *Roger Kimball*

On Emile M. Cioran.

"What a torment to be ordinary, a man among men!"
—E. M. Cioran

There are certain cultural figures who manage to make metaphysical gloominess the centerpiece and inspiration of their life's work. Though vigorously atheistic, they often resort to a quasi-religious terminology to express their obsession with the transcience and absurdities of life, man's capacity for evil and cruelty, and the ubiquity of suffering in this imperfect and ephemeral world. Capitalizing on mankind's hearty appetite for self-dramatization and self-pity, they expatiate, often with considerable eloquence, on the pointless-ness and corruption of all human endeavors and institutions, elaborating a seductive vision of doom. The darker strains of Romanticism—one thinks especially of figures like Novalis—provide one important source for this tendency; Schopenhauer's philosophical pessimism provides another. In modern times, most devotees of the genre have also injected a heavy dose of irony into their pathos, transforming Romantic despair into a species of hyper-conscious self-mockery even as they pursue their love affair with the void; misguided idealism gives way to a brittle, nihilistic cynicism. It is only natural that the title of Oswald Spengler's dour masterpiece, Der Untergang des Abendlandes ("The Decline of the West"), should emerge as the insistent rallying cry of these fervent partisans of disillusionment.

The Rumanian-born essayist and aphorist Emile M. Cioran is a minor but thoroughly typical contemporary representative of this tradition of metaphysical futility. The son of a Greek Orthodox priest, Cioran was born in a village in the Carpathians in ion. He studied philosophy at Bucharest University, winning a scholarship from the French Institute there in 1937. This took him to Paris, where he has since lived and worked. He began writing in French only in 1947, apparently expending great efforts to master the language. "It would be the narrative of a nightmare," he confesses with characteristic understatement, "were I to give you a detailed account of the history of my relations with this borrowed idiom." He published his first book, *Précis de décomposition*

(translated as *A Short History of Decay*), in 1949 and has since published several volumes of essays and aphorisms.[1]

> Cioran has attracted a staunch coterie of admirers in both Europe and the United States.

While hardly a household name, Cioran has attracted a staunch coterie of admirers in both Europe and the United States. In this country, his popularity, such as it is, was sparked largely by the early efforts of that unparalleled impresario of the new, Susan Sontag. In 1968, she contributed an introductory essay to *The Temptation to Exist*, Cioran's first book translated into English.[2] Describing him as "one of the most *delicate* minds of real power writing today," Miss Sontag touts him as the "most distinguished figure" now writing in the anti-systematic tradition of "Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein"—a tradition, she tells us, for which "thinking" (the quotation marks are hers) "is redefined as worthless unless it is an extreme act."

Be this as it may, Miss Sontag's estimation of Cioran's importance is by now commonplace among readers with a taste for his brand of high-pitched, deliberately provocative intellectual marauding. "Thinking Against Oneself" and "On a Winded Civilization": the titles of the opening two essays of *The Temptation to Exist* may be said to epitomize the mood and general outlook of not only this volume but all of Cioran's work. Here, as elsewhere, what Cioran offers are not reasoned arguments or sustained reflections but a series of highly charged *aperçus* on the debacle of Western civilization, the fate of the intellectual in contemporary society, the end of the novel, the virtues of tyranny, the future of Utopia, and other edifying topics. Yet behind these ostensible themes lies his one real abiding concern, a concern that Miss Sontag sums up admirably. "Cioran's subject: on being a *mind*, a consciousness tuned to the highest pitch of refinement." "In Cioran's writings," she adds, "the mind is a voyeur. But not of 'the world.' Of itself." With these last characterizations especially, we come close to the center of Cioran's thought.

The recent appearance of a translation of *Histoire et utopie*[3]—a slim collection of six essays meditating on the virtues and liabilities of the Utopian impulse, the imperfections of democracy, and the primacy of hate and rancor in the inventory of human emotions—offers an appropriate occasion on which to reassess Cioran's achievement. Is he the embattled intellectual hero that Miss Sontag presents, a lonely mind of "real power" courageously recording important truths that are too unpalatable for the majority of thinkers to acknowledge? Or is he more in the way of an intellectual *poseur*, a metaphysical aesthete who anatomizes his self-inflicted agonies not for the sake of any presumed truth but merely in order to provide himself with ever more exquisite spectacles of disbelief? Almost everything Cioran has written points to the latter conclusion.

Cioran's appeal does not rest only on the substance of his position; equally—if not more—important is his style, his epigrammatic tautness. His advertised labors with the French language have resulted in a style that blends an almost Olympian coolness and intellectuality with the appearance of passion bordering, at times, on hysteria. Like so much about Cioran, it is essentially an adolescent style: high-handed, confessional, histrionic, but nevertheless full of energy. His habitual use of the royal we—one of his most obvious rhetorical borrowings from Nietzsche—helps invest his writing with a patina of authority; and if one discounts context and forgets about picayune things like meaning, Cioran can be eminently quotable. But he clearly values the effect of his style over consistency of argument. One does not have to read far in his work before understanding Susan Sontag's enthusiasm: in Cioran she found a kindred spirit, an inspiration, a writer who preserved the appearance of serious intellectual inquiry while giving absolute priority to rhetorical gestures, verbal extravagances, and modishly provocative poses. Nor are English readers denied much of the spectacle. Cioran has been extremely well served by his main English translator, the poet Richard Howard, who has a remarkable feel for the appropriate cadences and vocabulary with which to render Cioran's self-consciously "brilliant," overworked prose.

It is obviously terribly important for Cioran to present himself as a Romantic figure *manqué*, a kind of Rimbaud with a degree in philosophy and more staying power. He casually describes himself as "prowling around the Absolute" and informs us that "the only minds which seduce us are the minds which have destroyed themselves trying to give their lives a meaning." He likes to see himself as an intellectually inclined aesthete who has had the courage and lucidity to see through everything, especially his former ideals. For example, while he now finds poetry "a vision of singsong and nullity, of fetid mysteries and affectations," it is essential that we understand that he was once a great lover of poetry: "I have loved it at the expense of my health; I anticipated succumbing to my worship of it." His superior insight and tenacity, we are meant to understand, competing with a passionate aesthetic sensibility, allow him to occupy this lonely place above the blandishments of poetry.

Cioran's favorite rhetorical gambit—his predominant bid for attention—is disarmingly simple: he takes conventional wisdom about politics, culture, or ethics and inverts it. In the hallowed tradition of *épater la bourgeoisie*, he sets out to shock, to unsettle, to provoke. Not that there is anything particularly new in Cioran's painstakingly contentious statements; mostly, they read like formulaic declarations of existentialist angst and venom. True, when one first dips into his work, it can seem brashly outrageous. How extraordinary to be told that philosophy is the "privilege of . . . *biologically* superficial peoples," to discover that "we spend the prime of our sleepless nights in mentally mangling our enemies, rending their entrails, wringing their veins, trampling each organ to mush," or to learn that at the age of twenty Cioran supposed "that to become the enemy of the human race was the highest dignity to which one might aspire."

Similarly, one cannot help being brought up short when Cioran looks back to his native Rumania only to tell us that "I owe it not only my finest, my surest failures, but also this talent for masking my cowardice and hoarding my compunctions," or summarizes his feelings about Paris with the observation that "this city, which I would exchange for no other in the world, is for that very reason the source of my misfortunes . . . . I often regret that wars have spared it, that it has not perished like so many others. Destroyed, it would have rid me of the happiness of living here . . . . I shall never forgive Paris for having bound me to space, for making me *from somewhere*."

After two or three essays, such displays lose whatever novelty they originally had; and after slogging through several books, one realizes that Cioran's pose as intellectual provocateur is little more than a mask for a series of repetitious clichés. Thus he is everywhere at pains to extol dreams and madness as bastions of freedom and genius. In "Thinking Against Oneself" he writes that "we are all geniuses when we dream, the butcher the poet's equal there . . . . Only the madman enjoys the privilege of passing smoothly from a nocturnal to a daylight existence." And a bit later: "It is the madman in us who forces us into adventure; once he abandons us, we are lost. . . . We cannot be *normal* and *alive* at the same time."

Beggars, too, are favored objects of Cioran's admiration.

Beggars, too, are favored objects of Cioran's admiration, for in his view the beggar's "thought is resolved into his being and his being into his thought. He *has* nothing, he *is* himself, he endures: to live on a footing with eternity is to live from day to day, from hand to mouth." It's the old image of the poor fool turning out to be wiser than the educated philistine. Cioran treats us to this one a good deal. In an essay entitled "Beyond the Novel," he admonishes us to dispense with the genre because it is too bookish and mundane to deal with what really matters.

> What interest can a mere life afford? What interest, books inspired by other books or minds dependent on other minds? Only the illiterate have given me that *frisson* of being which indicates the presence of truth. Carpathian shepherds have made a much deeper impression upon me than the professors of Germany, the wits of Paris. I have seen Spanish beggars, and I should like to have become their hagiographer. They had no need to invent a life for themselves: they *existed*; which does not happen in civilization.

What *does* happen in civilization? Cioran never really says. But one wonders if it really matters to him. As his quasi-metaphysical, yet nowhere defined, use of the term "existence" here suggests, he is not against using words primarily as emotional embroidery. And what about the "truth" that these illiterate Spanish peasants are said to possess? In another essay he scornfully summarizes his feelings about that dinosaur with a phrase: "The Truth? An adolescent fad or symptom of senility."

Clearly, Cioran's thought rests largely on a Romantic opposition of instinct to intellect, on a *preference* for instinct over intellect. "Whatever emanates from the inferior zones of our nature," he writes, "is invested with strength, whatever comes from below stimulates: we invariably produce and perform better out of jealousy and greed than out of nobility and disinterestedness." Hence his suspicion of reason as "the rust of our vitality," and his claim that "we are born to exist, not to know; to be, not to assert ourselves. Knowledge, having irritated and stimulated our appetite for power, will lead us inexorably to our ruin .... [K]nowledge taints the economy of a human being." No arguments are provided for these sentiments, possibly because, as he notes elsewhere, he is convinced that "the dynasty of intelligibility" is drawing to a close. What use are reasons and arguments in a realm of chaos and unintelligibility?

But though Cioran appears as an intellectual campaigning against the hegemony of the intellect, he is by no means given to a worship of the body or man's physical life. His paean to instinct does not preserve him from vituperative expressions of contempt for the body. "In what grease, what pestilence the spirit has taken up its abode! This body, whose every pore eliminates enough stench to infect space, is no more than a mass of ordure through which circulates a scarcely less ignoble blood, no more than a tumor which disfigures the geometry of the globe. Supernatural disgust! No one approaches without revealing to me, despite himself, the stage of his putrefaction, the livid destiny which awaits him."

It cannot be said that Cioran has improved or particularly matured with age. One of the most recent of his books to be translated into English, *The Trouble With Being Born* (1976), a collection of aphorisms published in French in 1973, strikes one as a series of rambling, disconnected thoughts culled from the journal of a well-read but deeply troubled teenager—that, or a collection of rejected entries from Woody Allen's parody of Kafka. Here are a few more or less randomly chosen tidbits:

> Three in the morning. I realize this second, then this one, then the next: I draw up the balance sheet for each minute. And why all this? *Because I was born*. It is a special type of sleeplessness that produces the indictment of birth.
>
> Physical need of dishonor. How I should have liked to be the executioner's son!
>
> If disgust for the world conferred sanctity of itself, I fail to see how I could avoid canonization.
>
> A book is a postponed suicide.
>
> The right to suppress everyone that bothers us should rank first in the constitution of the ideal State.
>
> Sometimes I wish I were a cannibal—less for the pleasure of eating someone than for the pleasure of vomiting him.

It is easy, is it not, to see why Susan Sontag describes this man as "one of the most *delicate* minds of real power writing today"?

Cioran's attitude—not to say attitudinizing—toward violence and disaster epitomizes his efforts at self-dramatization. Often, he pauses to vent his spleen on himself. "I have hated myself in all the objects of my hatreds, I have imagined miracles of annihilation, pulverized my hours, tested the gangrenes of the intellect." But he saves most of his energy for others. In "Odyssey of Rancor" we are told that by nature man is saturated with murderous resentment. Hate is presented as mankind's guiding principle, yet most men, especially in the civilized West, "are not equal to their hatred." Only this keeps them from destroying one another at once. The "need to kill, inscribed in every cell," has been stymied by civilization, and this has vitiated man's primitive vigor and led to decadence and decline. For Cioran, "we become good only by destroying the best of our nature," and, similarly, "our imaginations function only in hope of others' misfortune." "We"? "Our"? How easily grammar insinuates complicity!

In essays like "Russia and the Virus of Liberty" and "Learning from the Tyrants" (both of which, with "Odyssey of Rancor," appear in *History and Utopia*), Cioran elevates the themes of violence and hatred from the individual to the social and political level. Democratic liberalism appears not as a social and political achievement of the first order but as a concession to weakness and decay. "Freedoms prosper only in a sick body politic: tolerance and impotence are synonyms." Since he believes that "the passion to reduce others to the status of objects" is the key to understanding politics, he has profound respect for political tyrants. Reflecting on the Russian tradition from the time of the tsars down through Lenin and Stalin, for example, he tells us that "they were, as are these recent tyrants who have replaced them, closer to a geological vitality than to human anemia, despots perpetuating in our time the primordial sap, the primordial spoilage, and triumphing over us all by their inexhaustible reserves of chaos."

Though he assures us that he "abominates tyrants," Cioran also admits that he "harbors a weakness for tyrants"—largely, one suspects, because he thinks that "a world without tyrants would be as boring as a zoo without hyenas." Indeed, he seems to believe that we all would behave as tyrants if only we had the courage, lucidity, and forcefulness. Hence tyrants are said to "reveal us to ourselves, they incarnate and illustrate our secrets." And hence Cioran regards the asperity and violence of his writing as a substitute for the physical violence he has been incapable of perpetrating: "Unable to render myself worthy of them [the tyrants] by action, I hoped to do so by words, by the practice of sophism and enormity: to be as odious with the means of mind as they were with those of power, to devastate by language, to blow up the word and with it the world, to explode with one and the other, and finally to collapse under their debris!" Moreover, he envisions a great tyrant on the horizon, one who will forge the nations of the earth into a single entity. "The scattered human herd will be united under the guardianship of one pitiless shepherd, a kind of planetary monster before whom nations will prostrate themselves in an alarm bordering on ecstasy." Somehow, though, the decidedly unecstatic alarm one feels reading such professions is not assuaged by his blithe identification of Hitler as "the rough draft of our future," the harbinger of this envisioned "planetary monster."

Given his infatuation with exile, alienation, and historical catastrophe, one could have predicted that Cioran would sooner or later find himself moved to write about Judaism and the Jews. Among other things, "A People of Solitaries," his essay on the Jews in *The Temptation to Exist*, is a perfect example of his simplifying hostility toward religion.

> For them, eternity was a pretext for convulsions, a spasm: vomiting imprecations and anthems, they wriggled before the eyes of a God insatiable for hysterias. This was a religion in which man's relations with his Creator are exhausted in a war of epithets, in a tension which keeps him from pondering, from emphasizing and thereby from remedying his differences, a religion based on adjectives, effects of language, and in which style constitutes the only hyphen between heaven and earth.

Not, one hastens to add, that he is much better on Christianity. "[W]e"—that inveigling plural again— "yawn over the Cross . . . To attempt to save Christianity, to prolong its career, would not occur to us; on occasion it awakens our . . . indifference." (The ellipses are Cioran's.)

But of course his chief interest in Judaism is not in its religious dimension but in the stereotype of the Jew as victim and scapegoat. And here, as in his frequent invocation of "biological capital" in other essays, Cioran betrays a species of race thinking that is tantamount to racism. For him, the Jews occupy a distinct ontological category that makes them different *toto genere* from "ordinary" human beings: "Let someone else do them the insult of making 'meaningful' statements about them! I cannot bring myself to do so: to apply our standards to them is to strip them of their privileges, to turn them into mere mortals, an ordinary variety of the human type." Professed admiration becomes a cloak for an extraordinarily patronizing presumptuousness. Did the Jews suffer untold barbarities at the hands of the Nazis? Well, Cioran airily dismisses the question, advising us to "leave aside regrets, or delirium . . . . The instinct of self-preservation mars individuals and collectivities alike." Perhaps it was this last observation that led even Miss Sontag to admit that Cioran's discussion of the Jews "displays a startling moral insensitivity to the contemporary aspects of his theme."

It pleases Miss Sontag to describe Cioran's politics as "conservative." But even the briefest peek at his political animadversions shows that this is a complete misnomer. Cioran has no more desire to conserve or preserve traditional social and political arrangements than—well, than the tyrants he so lovingly eulogizes. Not that it is easy to determine what Cioran's politics are. "Tradition," "heritage," "democracy," "liberalism": these are terms of abuse for Cioran. But he is a connoisseur of inconsistency, capable of castigating Marxism on one page for "the sin of optimism" while elsewhere championing Communism as "the only reality to which one might still subscribe, if one harbors even a wisp of illusion as to the future." He declares in one place that "life without Utopia is suffocating" yet insists in another that "we shall never praise Utopias sufficiently for having denounced the crimes of ownership, the horror property represents, the calamities it causes. Great or small, the owner is corrupted, sullied in his essence . . . . To own even a broom, to count anything at all, as our property, is to participate in the general infamy."

But if there is a wild inconsistency of argument in Cioran's work, there is nonetheless an almost rigid consistency of attitude; Cioran's positions and opinions shift from page to page; contradictions abound; but throughout it all he maintains his stance as extreme philosophical anarchist: "Bluntly: my rebellion is a faith to which I subscribe without believing in it," he writes, reasoning that "since the Absolute corresponds to a meaning we have not been able to cultivate, let us surrender to all rebellions: they will end by turning against themselves, against us . . . ." And this, you understand, is meant as a recommendation.

In a writer as unsystematic and (one assumes) deliberately inconsistent as Cioran, it will perhaps seem idle to look for the presuppositions of his position. But lurking behind much of his writing is the essentially Romantic glorification of absolute freedom—the *confusion*, that is to say, of indeterminate spontaneity with genuine freedom, which has meaning only when limited and determined by particular choices. Throughout Cioran's work one encounters the idea that any definite thought or action is an encroachment upon freedom that ought ideally to be resisted. "The sphere of consciousness shrinks in action," he writes in the lead essay of *The Temptation to Exist*:

> no one who acts can lay claim to the universal, for to act is to cling to the properties of being at the expense of being itself, to a form of reality to reality's detriment . . . . If we would regain our freedom, we must shake off the burden of sensation, no longer react to the world by our senses, break our bonds . . . . The only free mind is the one that, pure of all intimacy with beings or objects, plies its own vacuity.

Elsewhere he speaks of "the illusory character, the nullity of all action" and concludes that "freedom can be manifested only in the void of beliefs, in the absence of axioms, and only where the laws have no more authority than a hypothesis." In other words, according to Cioran, freedom can be manifested only where it is impossible. For him, freedom is the elusive corollary of "Being" or "the Absolute," terms whose emptiness is not remedied simply by being capitalized.

At bottom, Cioran's main theme, the theme that he returns to again and again, the theme that more than any other has endeared him to leftist intellectuals like Miss Sontag and allowed them to overlook his otherwise unacceptable politics, is hatred of the West, its institutions, heritage, and legacy. Describing the West as "a sweet-smelling rottenness, a perfumed corpse," Cioran asserts that, having shed brutality, the West has also lost its strength. "Once subjects, they [the nations of the West] have become objects, forever dispossessed of that luminescence, that admirable megalomania which had hitherto protected them from the irreparable." Again and again he proclaims the end of Western culture. Even now the West is "preparing for its end," he tells us; "let us envisage chaos. Already, most of us are resigned to it."

Predictably, bourgeois society, being an enclave of liberal

democratic thought, comes in for special criticism.

Predictably, bourgeois society, being an enclave of liberal democratic thought, comes in for special criticism. In “Letter to a Faraway Friend,” the opening essay in *History and Utopia*, Cioran enlarges on the “lacunae of bourgeois society,” coyly assuring his “faraway friend” that such a society is not “entirely and absolutely displeasing to me—you know my weakness for the horrible—but the expenditure of insensitivity it requires to be endured is out of all proportion to my reserves of cynicism.” Expatiating on the “curse” that has fallen upon the liberal West, he asks why the West “produces only these businessmen, these shopkeepers, these racketeers with their blank stares and atrophied smiles, to be met with everywhere, in Italy as in France, in England as in Germany? Is it with such vermin as this that a civilization so delicate and complex must come to an end?” Of course, anti-Western animus has been a stock-in-trade of fashionable intellectuals at least since the middle of the nineteenth century. But Cioran’s vitriol attains a rare level of savagery and contempt. And one cannot help wondering if there isn’t something in the rejoinder that Cioran quotes from an unnamed friend in “Some Blind Alleys: A Letter”: “‘The West—you aren’t even part of it.’”

Especially in his earlier work, Cioran’s rhetoric recalls no one so much as Nietzsche, and one is not surprised to find that Miss Sontag observes—not without embarrassment, one suspects, for the observation cannot but dim her subject’s claim to originality—that Nietzsche “set down almost all Cioran’s position almost a century ago.” In fact, though, this is only half true. There is no doubt that Cioran was deeply impressed by Nietzsche; his writing is permeated by the philosopher’s themes, his perfervid prose, even his distinctive locutions and images. Nietzsche’s infatuation with violence and power, his use of physiological metaphors to explain art and other cultural phenomena, his deliberate inversion of inherited moral categories, his vision of a stance “beyond good and evil": all this and more reappears predigested in Cioran’s works.

But Cioran is less Nietzsche’s disciple than his ape. He adopts the extravagant rhetorical gestures, glories in shocking conventional wisdom, and clearly would like to describe himself, as did Nietzsche, as intellectual “dynamite.” But when one comes to examine the substance of Cioran’s thought, one discovers that on almost every issue his position—insofar as he adopts a consistent position—is completely at odds with Nietzsche’s teaching. Miss Sontag herself admits that “what’s missing in Cioran’s work is anything parallel to Nietzsche’s heroic effort to surmount nihilism.” Since the effort to surmount nihilism forms the core of Nietzsche’s mature thought, its utter absence in Cioran’s work already marks an important divergence from Nietzsche.

More generally, Cioran’s gloomy flirtations with the void are diametrically opposed to Nietzsche’s efforts to overcome the life-poisoning pessimism of (as he puts it in *The Gay Science*) the man who “revenges himself on all things by forcing his own image, the image of his torture, on them, branding them with it.” Cioran’s work proceeds from a disgust—or at least the pretense of a

disgust—with life, especially the life of civilized man. Despite his own excesses, at the center of Nietzsche's thought is the ambition to woo modern man back from his disenchantment with life. "I should very much like," Nietzsche writes, "to do something that would make the thought of life even a hundred times more appealing." For Cioran, revenge is the lugubrious tonic that provides life with its chief fascination; for Nietzsche "the spirit of revenge" constitutes the main impediment to man's self-affirmation. Behind all the bravura, there is something terribly pathetic about Cioran. "What a torment to be ordinary, a man among men!" he has exclaimed. But, as he put it in one of his most insightful observations, "nothing is more commonplace than the *ersatz* troubled soul, for everything can be learned, even *angst*."

1. Cioran's other collections are *Les Syllogismes de l'amertume* (1952), *La Tentation d'exister* (1956), *Histoire et utopie* (1960), *La Chute dans le temps* (1964), and *De l'inconvénient d'être né* (1973). Go back to the text.
2. Readers who do not own *The Temptation to Exist* can find Miss Sontag's essay reprinted under the title "'Thinking Against Oneself: Reflections on Cioran" in her book *Styles of Radical Will* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969). Go back to the text.
3. *History and Utopia*, by E. M. Cioran, translated by Richard Howard; Seaver, 118 pages, $16.95. The six essays translated and collected in this volume appeared previously in various journals. Go back to the text.

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Critical Temper: Interventions from* The New Criterion *at 40* (Encounter Books) and *Where Next? Western Civilization at the Crossroads* (Encounter Books).

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 6 Number 7 , on page 37

https://newcriterion.com/issues/1988/3/the-anguishes-of-em-cioran